

Webinars: What, Why, and How?

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Although most of us are familiar with webinars, it's worth reviewing what they are and how they work. A webinar is a web-based seminar, that is, a presentation, lecture, workshop or seminar that is transmitted over the Web using video-conferencing software. A key feature of a webinar is the ability to give, receive and discuss information, in short, its interactive elements, which attempt to reproduce the benefits of attending a live seminar. Audience members can ask questions of the presenter, the speaker can survey or poll the audience and get feedback as he or she delivers the information.

For the first time this year CEANY offered a series of "brown bag" webinars at noon every other month during the year, with the intention that colleagues could sit together, eating their sandwiches and participate virtually in a webinar on a matter of common interest such as Assessment 101, Marketing, Using Social Media in CE, Program Planning and Development, and Careers in Continuing Education

For many of us participating in these webinars, this was the first time we had ever delivered a webinar and it raised a number of issues. There was the excitement of using a PowerPoint slide deck and technology, such as Black Board Collaborate, to reach colleagues all over New York State and the awareness that this was an opportunity to reach many more people than a presentation at the regional and/or annual CEANY conference. Since webinars are beamed over the internet they are not constrained by actual physical space, so the days of standing room only at a workshop are over. But there was also the challenge of using the conferencing software and designing a new workshop or redesigning an existing workshop to be interactive online. There are significant differences between an in-person and virtual presentation.

During a conventional workshop you can gauge the audience's level of interest and engagement and nimbly respond to the room. As the participants come in you can ask them about themselves and what they are hoping to take away from the workshop and you can make last minute tweaks to the content of your presentation and add (or delete) to your script based on this immediate feedback. As the workshop progresses you can ask for information and comments, you can set the group tasks, and the group can interact with the presenter and each other. No such luxuries are possible when you are sitting in front of a computer in your office talking to the computer screen. It was essential to learn how to interact with the unseen audience by integrating activities, such as surveys, into the Power Point deck. You start to learn and use a whole new set of skills presenting a webinar - - an invaluable professional development opportunity and exactly what continuing education is all about.

Lisa Raposo, Interim Director of the SUNY Center for Professional Development, was our fearless leader and facilitator in this enterprise and taught us the theory of how often to survey (every 3 slides) and what method to use (Yes/No answers, emojis, surveys with answers a-e, which are posted to a virtual whiteboard as percentages, open-ended questions). Integrating these into the presentation and managing the responses was a new instructional method that had to be learned on the fly, but it was immensely satisfying to receive feedback and know that the participants were not checking their email or cleaning their offices, but were actively engaged.

The methods of interaction need to be carefully chosen to match the information you want from the audience. For example, at the beginning of the webinar you might survey who is in the audience (are they Deans? Directors? Program Managers? Instructors?) In this instance you want up to 5 five categories and the actual results are posted to the whiteboard. The presenter comments, “I see we have five deans in the audience, four program directors, six program managers, and more than ten instructors.” As the presenter receives feedback she comments on what she sees, so as to create a dialog with the participants and provide a coherent picture of the responses. She wants to know their area of interest, so she might post just three options: Are they interested in workforce development? Pre-college programs/High school equivalency? Business services? Yes/No questions give you quick information about a single item (Does your college give credit for non-credit training programs? ~~Yes/No~~) and emojis allow participants to express feelings 😊. Open ended questions allow participants to post general observations or ask for more information and are often used nearer the end of the webinar. Throughout, participants may post questions/comments in the messaging box, to which the presenter may respond.

More than with a public presentation, a webinar needs a script so that the presenter can stay on task and not get distracted by managing all the interactions. Jokes and asides all need to be scripted so that they don't get lost in the presentation and so that the timing doesn't go awry. It's important to keep a strong sense of how long the webinar will last and maintain a variety of content and pace. Critical preparation for our webinars was the “dry run”, during which Lisa Raposo patiently coached and tutored us through the Collaborate venue, interactive components, Power Point slide development, and timing.

Now that you know the *What, Why and How* of webinars, it's time for you to hone your virtual presentation skills. Join us for the 9/18/15

Best Practices in Conducting a Webinar

Friday, September 18, noon – 1:00 pm, EST

Learn virtual presentations skills to enhance your effectiveness and build your résumé.

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